

# "Well, There It Is. Take It and Use It."

William Gatzmer Wagoner  
From an interview in 1985

*One winter morning in 1942, Wagoner, a Livermore rancher, went out to his fields to find some unexpected activity.*

I hadn't any inkling that anybody was interested in the ranch or that Uncle Sam wanted it. The war had already started, but there was nothing said. I went up one morning, and I saw some men working out in the field. The field was already cropped to barley, and it was a few inches out of the ground; being late December, early January. And here were these men mudding around in my grain.

I didn't say anything, but the next morning, I was up there before anybody, and I went out and pulled out every one of their grade stakes. They had set them 100 feet apart for grade levels, with a figure marked on them giving the gradient and all of that. I went out, and I took all of those stakes and took them out of the field and put them in under an oak tree, just sitting in the yard.

This boss man came over to me, and

he said, "Do you know what become of all of those stakes?" "Yes. I took them out. They're piled under the oak tree. If you want them, get them and get the hell out of here." He said, "We put them there yesterday." I said, "I've had the tax bill on this ranch for 20 years, and it's my property. Get out." He turned to one of his chain men and said, "No need trying to work with this SOB around here." So they took off.

About an hour later, I had a special messenger come out from Livermore to hunt for me, to tell me that Commander Johnson wanted to talk with me.

This Commander Johnson said, "You know we are going to take that ranch?"\* I said, "Well, there's a war on. I guess you have the privilege, but why don't they come and talk with me first so I know what to tell my men?" Not a one of them

had said boo. He said, "Well, that will be taken care of," and he was mad. The next day they came out with their hats in their hands. "We have instructions from Commander Johnson to enter your property." "Well, there it is. Take it and use it," I said.

*Wagoner's property became the site of a U.S. naval air station and ultimately LLNL. Wagoner died in 1987. Although he claimed in this interview that he was paid "around \$230 per acre" for the property, records indicate that the government paid him \$75,265 for 629 acres, amounting to approximately \$120 per acre.*

\*During World War II, Congress passed a bill that gave the military the right to take over whatever property they needed.

The U.S. Naval Air Station that would eventually become the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL).



# Wanted: a New Lab—But Where?

Edward Teller  
Excerpted from *Memoirs*, p. 336–342

*Dr. Teller recounts his discussions with Professor Lawrence and Herb York about opening a second weapons laboratory in “the little town of Livermore.”*

**O**n February 2, 1952, Ernest took me to view a site that he felt would be an appropriate place for a second weapons laboratory, a one-square-mile area near the little town of Livermore. During World War II, the site had served as an inland Navy base for training pilots. After the war, the base was closed and sat idle until 1950; then Lawrence acquired the land as the site for the Materials Testing Accelerator (MTA) that he and Luis Alvarez had recommended in 1949.

That evening, Ernest took me to dinner at Trader Vic’s, his usual choice for discussing a really important project. Lawrence was enthusiastic about having a second laboratory at Livermore.

I consumed a very tasty Mai Tai while Ernest explained that the much needed second weapons laboratory would be welcome as an extension of the Berkeley Radiation Laboratory. At the moment, one Mai Tai was not enough to convince me that this was a splendid offer, and I did not have another drink. I agreed that I

wanted to work in a laboratory that was devoted to developing thermonuclear weapons.

In late 1951, I had begun considering the question of where such a laboratory should be located. One of my first ideas was that it would be easy and practical to set it up in Chicago. Argonne was nearby, and a vast pool of talented scientists was readily at hand. And I would not be separated from my close friends again.

While I was still trying to decide what to do next, Herb York came to see me [in Chicago]; he brought a message from Ernest, who now seemed to be actively campaigning to have the second lab established as an adjunct of his Berkeley laboratory. Herb,

**“One Mai Tai was not enough to convince me”**

who seemed embarrassed by his role, was trying to be delicate. Ernest wanted me to know, Herb reported, that if the University of California were chosen as the site, the new laboratory director would report to Ernest. I said that seemed like a good arrangement. Herb went on, tentatively, “Ernest would like me to be the new director.” I immediately and sincerely responded, “That sounds like an excellent idea to me.”

And it did. I much preferred to pursue new ideas that occurred to me and to support others’ good ideas when I met them than to be involved in the day-to-day administrative affairs that confront directors. I saw York as a thoroughly able administrator. He had worked at Oak Ridge on the separation process during the war, he had headed the Berkeley group that had provided instrumentation for the George shot, and he had Ernest’s approval. He did indeed prove to be a good administrator.

I thought it a typically forthright gesture for Ernest to tell me of his desire for York to head the laboratory before I made my decision about accepting an appointment there. York concluded by pointing out that the University of California wanted the laboratory, Ernest believed that they would get it, and I should come and help establish it.

Come what might, I felt that I had to turn my deeply felt advocacy of a second laboratory into reality, and see the hydrogen bomb through to a more mature state. And so I took yet another leave of absence from the University of Chicago; Mici and I rented our beautiful new home for a year, packed our belongings, gathered our children, and left for California.



LLNL cofounders E. O. Lawrence and Edward Teller with first Lab Director Herbert York.

**“Who is Mr. Livermore?”**

*General Fields to Herbert York during discussions about opening a second nuclear lab*